

Celluloid

by Jürgen Fauth

Mina stumbled and fell headlong into her apartment, smacking her knees and the palms of her hands on the hardwood floor. She bit her lip, cursed, resisted the temptation to cry. Rubbing her bruised joints, she turned to see what had tripped her.

Just inside the door sat a pair of metal cases, knee-high, hexagonal, green-grey, a sticker centered on each with Mina's name, unabbreviated, the way nobody ever used it. The label was handwritten in blocky capitals, with a peculiar choice of preposition that made the canisters seem more like presents than parcel: FOR WILHELMINA KOTTBUS.

Mina sighed. She reached for the keys and mail she'd dropped, and picked herself up. She had spent the entire day at NYU hospital, where her husband Sam was ill with dengue fever. He'd caught the tropical disease on their honeymoon, which they'd cut short immediately after the resort doctor in Punta Cana diagnosed him. "Bad luck," the doctor had said. The disease wasn't exactly rare, but there also hadn't been an outbreak in years.

They'd been back for three days now and the marriage was off to a rocky start. The reception had been a disaster, the honeymoon was ruined, and Mina was beginning to resent the long hours at the hospital. This was not how she had envisioned her new life. She spent as much time with Sam as she could, reading in the uncomfortable plastic chair under the glare of the fluorescent lights while her new husband tossed and turned, his eyes glassy, moaning and sweating through his pajamas. In his brief lucid moments Sam complained about the pain in his limbs, the heat, the all-too-real nightmares. Even when he slept, the moaning didn't stop.

Dengue fever could be fatal, but the smug New York doctor had assured Mina that Sam would be fine. He told her to go home. There could be another week before the fever subsided, and she should take care of herself, rest. Mina thought the doctor was too eager to

touch her arm. She was attractive, a little short but busty. Men tended to underestimate her.

The Greenpoint one-bedroom seemed smaller to Mina than ever. They had lived together for almost a year before getting married, and now the apartment was a mess, every open space crowded with wedding gifts -- blenders, toasters, sheets, and silverware. The kitchen counter was covered with unopened mail. She hadn't unpacked their suitcases yet.

FOR WILHELMINA KOTTBUS.

Belated wedding presents from a distant relative? The last time she'd heard her full name had been at her college graduation, almost four years ago.

Mina pushed aside a stack of magazines and lifted the canisters onto the kitchen counter. Picking one at random, she popped its twin latches and opened the lid. Inside were four reels of film.

She opened the second container. Three more reels, kept in place by a jammed-in Styrofoam wedge. Sturdy plastic held black celluloid wrapped around the center. Wasn't this stuff flammable? Mina pulled a reel out of the case. She set it on the counter and wheeled it around until she found the end of the film strip, locked down with a pin that held the sprocket holes in place. She carefully unwound it, thinking how odd it was that even though her grandfather had been a filmmaker she'd never held celluloid before.

Oh, she thought.

Did this have anything to do with her grandfather?

Mina had never known the old man, a German director who had emigrated to America during the Second World War. He'd made one big flop in Hollywood that still showed sometimes on late-night cable. All his German movies had been lost, and he'd killed himself before Mina was born. Her father refused to talk about him.

The celluloid in her hands was entirely black, and Mina kept unrolling it, unable to stop. She tried to wrap it around the fingers of one hand and turn the reel with the other, but the film kept slipping off. She let it stack up on the counter into a loose loop that curled on its own. After two more revolutions she hit a logo, something like a

coat of arms. Then, white words on black: the credits. She held the film up to the kitchen neon light, but the letters were too small to read. She kept unwinding it further, and some of the celluloid slipped off the counter and onto the Swiss espresso machine they'd gotten from Sam's boss. The words grew bigger until there were only two lines, and now she could make out letters, repeated on every advancing frame:

EIN FILM VON
KLAUS KOTTBUS

Into the empty apartment's silence, Mina made a surprised noise, not unlike her husband's feverish moans. She was holding in her hands one of her grandfather's lost films.

